

## STAY Tuned- Roots and Change- Youth Advocacy in Rural Communities with Wyatt Wagner Episode 24

[00:00:00]

**Mei:** Welcome back to Stay Tuned, supporting Transition Aged Youth. This podcast is brought to you by the Transitions to adulthood Center for Research at UMass Medical School Department of Psychiatry, and in partnership with our research sponsor, the National Institute for Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research. My name is Mei. I'm one of your co-hosts and

**Gillian:** I'm Gillian and I'm also a co-host.

**Mei:** And today we've invited one of our young adult advisory board members, Wyatt, here to discuss his nonprofit, and how that relates to community participation outcomes within his community.

Wyatt, don't know if you wanna go ahead and introduce yourself further.

**Wyatt:** Yeah. So I'm Wyatt. I'm a credentialed youth peer advocate. 21 years old. I have full-time job as a direct support [00:01:00] professional. I'm also a college student and I just announced that I am running for my district's board of legislators.

**Mei:** In our past conversations we learned that you run a nonprofit called Youth of Lewis County which you've said is a peer advocacy nonprofit. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that means and what inspired you to start youth of Lewis County?

**Wyatt:** Yeah, so for me. You know I, I was, I wanted to start it 'cause of my lived experience both as someone who needed peer services and as someone who was providing peer services.

You know, where I live, we have another, a couple of other agencies that provide peer services, but they're not very youth-oriented. And when I was working at one of them, I, I tried to do it, but it's just. In my opinion, it was just easier to go out and start my own and have their support to start it.

But you know, just have more control over it and make it more youth oriented. And have the youth have control over the nonprofit itself.

**Gillian:** Yeah. So what services and programs do you provide?

**Wyatt:** So currently we're providing youth peer advocate services for ages 13 to 21. That essentially just means that we are kinda like a professional best friend for them.

It's entirely free to them. And, you know, I can advocate for their needs in school, at home, just get them outta the house. You know, I, one was having one of my individuals having some anger issues and his mom asked me to stop by the other day and just get 'em outta the house. It was a day off school, so we went to McDonald's, got some food, and he was feeling much better afterwards.

Other than that, we also, you know, we, we, we try to really. Give the youth who are participating the leadership and control over what we're doing. If a youth comes to us with an idea, we're gonna, as long as we can afford it and it's safe, we're, we're gonna go forward with it. Like for instance, a group of us [00:03:00] were like, you know, we need to get some money.

So we're doing a renaissance fair this summer. It's the first ever one in the Lewis County. It's gonna be entirely youth led, youth run volunteers and people are very excited about that. So it, it's giving the youth that the control over something and the leadership opportunity where they normally wouldn't, you would usually have like a supervisor that's an adult that's really controlling a lot more aspects and what the youth might prefer.

**Mei:** Yeah, it sounds like you definitely do a lot to incorporate youth voice and really listen to their needs. So that, that's really awesome to hear. So before Youth of Lewis County existed, what did community look like for those you currently serve?

**Wyatt:** So, I mean, even right now, you know, Youth of Lewis County's still a little bit newer. We've only been going for a year still trying to build up, and make that systematic reform that we need in the county, but.

The main thing that we keep hearing from everyone is [00:04:00] there is nothing in the county for 13 to 21 year olds to do. They want skate parks, they want public pools, they want teen center. They want somewhere to go that is safe and supervised, but isn't overly supervised and overly controlled on what they're doing.

They want a place where they feel safe to be themselves. But still safe enough to be in the public on their own. So yeah, that, that's really one thing that we're pushing for. And then just our local government and community services are

very, they, they need to hear the youth more and we're having struggles with that.

Fortunately, we did just have a listening session with our local Chamber of Commerce, so that was an amazing thing, and they heard some of the concerns that the youth were having and concerns from, like me and my sister are military and we, we moved here, we're not from here. And it's a small rural area.

So it was a [00:05:00] very interesting conversation to have with them. 'cause they were like, oh, we never thought about, you know, a military kid isn't gonna want to go to a local place when they're used to like store bought Walmart maple syrup instead of like Lewis County maple syrup or something like that. So they were kind of excited to hear like these are ways that we can start enticing younger generations and military families into getting involved in the community a little more.

**Gillian:** That's really great that you can bring that perspective.

**Wyatt:** Yeah.

**Mei:** Yeah. I guess one thing I'm curious about is how do you find that balance between like, listening to the youth and what they want, but then. Serving as like, okay, we can't do this. Like, that's a little bit too much. Like how do you find that balance of fulfilling their needs but still maintaining safety and protection for them.

**Wyatt:** Yeah. That's what I am personally struggling with too. And so many grant, like [00:06:00] places that we get grants from and stuff is, they're just so used to it being a fully adult led thing and having so many safety procedures and stuff in place. And, and that's good to have, but I think they don't seem to understand the concept that we're going for, where it's the youth that are controlling what we're doing.

But the idea is, you know, you still have the adults there to ensure the safety of the programs and ensure that if, if, if it's really something that we shouldn't be doing, we're not gonna do it. So I would say the hardest part right now though is, is just funding in general. That there's a lot of great ideas and it's just hard to find the funding for these ideas.

**Mei:** I definitely hear you and I'm sure as well with, like a more novel model it makes it even harder to find people who are willing to fund it, even though it is like a fantastic idea and I feel like you guys are really seeing results in the

community [00:07:00] or positive results in the community. So, I, I feel your pain.

**Wyatt:** Yeah. I feel like the hard part right now is balancing what the community's telling us they want, and then being that middleman for the community and going to the people that are giving us these grants and being like, this is what they want. But then we also have to be the middleman for them, telling the community that this is what they want and that that's a very difficult thing to do, especially being a youth myself.

It's like, these are things I want too. So...

**Mei:** yeah. Fully. That is, that is definitely a challenging place to be in. Telephone is never a fun game unless you're playing telephone.

**Wyatt:** And that's why like the listening sessions are great because they, they're putting the community in front of these people that are giving us the grants and have access to these resources that we don't have.

**Mei:** Yeah. Well, I guess that feeds into this next question, which I feel like you've touched on, but I would love to hear more about. But in your opinion, how [00:08:00] has youth of Lewis County bolstered the community participation of the youth and young adults in your area?

**Wyatt:** Yeah, so. I, I really feel like, you know, like I said, we've, we've given some youth a voice and you know, in the beginning it was a little more just family and friends that were attending things, but, you know, we, we've slowly like reached out a little more, especially with the Renaissance Fair, we're starting to get youth that are, that like costume designing and arts and crafts a little more.

I think when I went to create youth of Lewis County. I wanted a very broad idea so that we're not one specific area. I didn't want to just be developmental disabilities or this or that. I, I wanted it to be broad so that in the future youth of Lewis County can expand for what the youth in that current generation that we are serving, want and need in the community.

I mean, personally for me. My specialties is in developmental disabilities and stuff, and that's why I've [00:09:00] pushed so hard for the Youth Peer Advocate program. But when we have people that come into leadership or want to take control of certain things in youth of Lewis County, you know that that's

where they can expand on because we don't, we're not one specific thing we're we youth.

**Mei:** In our prior conversation you had talked a lot about the like rural nature of your community as well as the more like religious undertones of your community.

I think it would be really interesting to discuss how you think those two aspects play a part in your nonprofit and what it's like navigating those.

Like are there any benefits or challenges or barriers that come with, those aspects?

**Wyatt:** Yeah, so, you know, the biggest barrier for us is, you know, we're working with youth, but we also have a lack of transportation. There's not really public transportation around here and it's not easily accessible.

And if we do have public transportation, youth [00:10:00] really don't understand how to utilize it. 'cause we do have a public bus system. But it's a very confusing system and it, it's not very youth friendly to understand. Some of the bigger issues that are around here is everyone knows everyone. So there's conflicts of interest, when you're trying to, you know, work something out with someone else.

You, you have a conflict of interest with this person and this person and this person. And you know, some people like maybe you're having like arguments with someone over something and you're like, well, we should do it this way. It's just, it's, it is hard when everyone knows everyone. Another hard part is like every rural town is, is just that your last name matters.

And I don't have a last name that is known, not being from here. So building a nonprofit was very hard and still is very hard. I've kind of had to force myself into these positions and it makes people uncomfortable because they don't really know who I am. The one benefit that I've had is. [00:11:00] While growing up here, I made great connections with people in this field by utilizing their services.

So when I went to create this, I had their name to back up the organization. And that was the benefit of everyone knows everyone too. So, in regards to like the religion side of things is definitely difficult. one thing that I'm finding very hard to explain to people is that we're not asking for change. We're asking for progress. And, you know, change will come as a part of progress, but we're

trying to move forward. And often, you know. I hear these people, they, they say, you know, we don't wanna move away from our values or our morals and stuff as a community.

And I think that's what progress allows us, just in the term of progress. It allows us to keep those morals and values while continuing to move forward with change that is good for the community.

**Mei:** That's such a great way of putting and I'm curious for [00:12:00] you, what does progress look like in, in the context of what you're trying to do?

**Wyatt:** Yeah, for progress, for us, it is, it's really just listening to the youth more because that seems to be the biggest issue right now is, is getting the youth voice out there, giving them those opportunities.

And, you know, not always having control over every little aspect of every little thing. And just being accepting of different people. That, that, that's a very hard thing in rural communities in general. Not just in regards to religion, but just any small community. Just it, it, if something is different, it's scary.

Especially for me, I'm, I think, a lot differently than a lot of the people that I'm working alongside on boards and committees and stuff, and I'm not afraid to share my personal experiences with things, and I'm not afraid to just say something like I just go out and say it.

**Mei:** Yeah, that, that definitely makes sense. And [00:13:00] I'm curious about things you've noticed about the young adults you work with and serve. Because you've mentioned how you think the rural aspect affects their community participation, but is there anything you've noticed about the religious aspect affecting their community participation?

**Wyatt:** Yeah, so there's the youth who do go to church and participate in that stuff. They actually have like a lot of youth programs in churches. I think the hard part in our community is that we forget that there's also the youth who aren't going to church, most of our like community center areas that are open to, things that we could host youth events at are churches. And it's just uncomfortable to go into a church and hold an event.

**Mei:** Yeah, no, I, I can definitely see the challenge in it seems to me that the church. Is one of the main institutions in your community that you can go to and host things at. But at the same time, not [00:14:00] everyone, not everyone has faith.

**Wyatt:** We started up a youth weekend activities program. At the time I was unaware of the place that we were renting was actually owned by the Mennonite community.

So while they might not be directly saying that, you know, this is a religious affiliated organization. And they're saying it's a community center. You know, you bring in a controversial organization to partner with you, and that, that brings up some red lights for them.

But there's also the ones that are like, this is fine. Like the director of the organization, she, she was fine with it, but it was the certain people on the board were up front. It just caused a lot of issues and. You gotta kind of weigh like is it worth fighting this right now? Or just finding a different space.

**Mei:** Right. Yeah. And then I'm sure budget is an issue as well.

**Wyatt:** Yeah.

**Mei:** When it comes to finding a different space. Yeah. That's a tough line to walk.

**Wyatt:** It is.

**Mei:** And

it sounds like you're doing the best job you can [00:15:00] and, and a really great job at that.

**Wyatt:** But I will say that the youth are less engaged in the religious side of things in the community which I think is just a thing that's happening everywhere at this point so it it, it goes back to the age issues where the older generations are kind of trying to control certain things and the youth are like, Hey, let's change this.

**Mei:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. And I can imagine too, like back to your point about there's not really much else for youth to engage in, so that's why it's even more important for you to provide more things for youth and young adults to do in the area. So they're not isolated.

**Wyatt:** Yeah.



Like the town I live in, it's a very small town. We have one pizza shop, one small diner one bar, and then like one gas station. And then we have a Dollar General, and we have three churches just on the main road.

Wow. So [00:16:00] it, it's, it's interesting and. The churches, do have that like teen center kind of thing.

Usually after they do their church stuff. Mm-hmm. But we need to be able to bring that to the rest of the community. And one thing that we were discussing actually during the listening session with the chamber of Commerce, 'cause we brought up the teen center a lot, is that. Teens, the type of area that we need for teens in the community is similar to like when they go on their phone, you can go on your phone and there's so many different things to do.

You go on TikTok and there's so many different categories and you can find your niche. But you know, we can't have everything spread out so far in the community. So like, if someone likes art, they shouldn't have to travel to the other side of the county to go find something to do that's art or travel to another county to go do that.

Like we, we can still offer small aspects of that. Within a teen center. And it just, it would, in my opinion, it would get them off of their phones a little more because it, it's the real version of what they're having on their phones.

[00:17:00]

**Mei:** Yeah, I, I definitely see what you're saying. And I think that goes back to like why having the youth led aspect is so important.

Because they can tell you, Hey, I'm really looking to explore like my artistic side. Can we bring in this, can we bring in that? Yeah. And like listening to that I can imagine is really key.

**Wyatt:** Yep.

**Mei:** In addition to being an advocate, you've talked about how you're establishing and providing vital services for young people. So in your opinion, how does this work play a role in navigating your own personal mental health?

**Wyatt:** I would say it, it definitely makes me feel better about myself, especially with all the stress going on, like when I can go out and.



Help a youth that is struggling like a, a last minute thing. Like it, like I was talking about the kid that had some anger issues, you know, his mom was just like last minute texted me like, Hey, can you come help us? And I got him out [00:18:00] of the house. We went and got McDonald's and he was happier after. And that feels good for me.

And we worked on some coping mechanisms and communicating better with parents about how to handle his anger. And, you know. When I'm working with these youth, whether it be youth, peer advocate services, or just any type of program that we're creating or doing, I am experiencing new things with them and I'm learning new coping mechanisms or new, just all types of new things with them.

I'm, I'm not some expert in these fields. I'm, I'm, I'm a peer to them. We're learning together and I, that, that feels really good for me. The hard part with my position is, you know, being the executive director, I, everything kind of falls back onto me. I gotta make hard decisions especially balancing the needs of the community versus the grants and stuff.

And being a newer nonprofit, we also have to make sure we're bouncing what our [00:19:00] values are and what my personal values are. Being the person that founded it you know, I, I don't wanna set up youth of Lewis County to. Be similar to some of the other nonprofits around here where they're just compliant with whatever the grant person is saying and not what the community is saying.

I want, I wanna be that middle man to be able to negotiate both sides. But that definitely has a big effect on my mental health. It can have a big negative effect. I, I, I do see a therapist every other week to help keep myself sane with everything going on and I've had a very stressful last couple of months.

I. And I just needed something to remind myself of, like who I am. So I got my first ever tattoo. And it actually says who I am is where I stand. Where I stand is where I fall. It's a quote from my favorite TV show, Dr. Who, so it's, it's a pretty cool tattoo. It's upside down, but

**Mei:** is it a TARDIS? I can't really.

**Wyatt:** Yeah, it's the [00:20:00] TARDIS.

**Mei:** That's so cool. I was a huge Doctor Who fan growing up, so that, that really speaks to me. That makes me so happy.

**Gillian (2):** Yeah, it's a really cool tattoo. I saw your face. May, you got so excited.

**Mei:** I feel like I don't know anyone who was a Doctor Who Fan so every time I hear it mentioned, I'm like, oh, oh my gosh.

**Wyatt:** Yeah, I'm gonna try and get a Doctor Who TARDIS at the Renaissance Fair. 'cause it, it, it just fits with the theme. So, I, I honestly, I do feel like Dr. Who has had a big influence on who I am 'cause it, it is just had so many great stories and it kind of goes back to the, the progress versus change thing. You know, I feel like in the show he's always trying to make progress and be the best person he can. Not for himself, but the community as well.

And he's always seems to be that middleman between the bad guys and the, the good guys. So.

**Mei:** Yeah, that's so true. And I mean, name a [00:21:00] person who sacrifices more than he does.

**Wyatt:** Yeah,

**Mei:** yeah. Very true. Or I should, I should say they do 'cause he's not... yeah, I'm trying to remember that some of the other points you had made before I got distracted and.

I guess I wanna just acknowledge like, it's probably super tough walking that line, being that middleman again. And it sounds like you have so many plates spinning right now. Yeah,

**Wyatt:** I'm noticing that my nonprofit cannot get further until we start fixing the systematic issues within our local government because the local government needs to be there to support us. And if they can't be there to support us, then we can't be there to support the community.

Yeah. So that's pretty much the only reason I'm running for legislator so that I can work within the government to fix these issues that we're, we're seeing. You know, I, I think I would probably be one of the youngest legislators to run in Lewis [00:22:00] County probably ever. And you know, I, I, I, I feel like.

With my experience, I have a good chance of winning. I have good community ties with the district with I'm in and just, you know, I know how to make websites. I already made a website for the running and you know, historically

when I look back at the past elections, it's always been, you know, I. You win by default because there's no one else running.

So I'm actually being running against someone else this year.

So I, I really gotta push harder because, you know, I have good community ties, but not a lot of people know who I am.

**Mei:** Well, I am so impressed by that. I just, best of luck, regardless of the outcome. I'm sure it's going to be a very, like, such a great educational opportunity for you and Yeah, and I, you're a great example of how passion can really influence what one does in their community and, [00:23:00] yeah, I mean, I just think like coming from personal experience, I feel like I could take a page outta your book and I'm very inspired because I don't know, there, I get so intimidated by systemic issues and I'm like, well, I'm just one person. Like how could I ever change anything systemic wise? And I agree with you in order for.

A lot of the more downstream things to happen. Systemic change needs to happen first.

**Wyatt:** It just takes that one person to stand up and that that's kind of what me running for district legislator is, is I don't really care if I win. I mean, it's great if I do, but you know, just showing that me as a young person was willing to go against someone who's already pretty well known in the community.

And, you know, be there for the community. 'cause I, I'm not going there for myself. I'm going there because that's what the community wants. Regardless of what my personal views are.

I wanna hold listening sessions. I wanna hold, I, I wanna be there for the community, vote for what they want. I don't care [00:24:00] what I personally want. I wanna have debates with these people. I wanna be there to discuss things. And we don't currently have that. I, I, I didn't even know who my, the current legislator was until I was, at a meeting and she said who she was like, I, I never met her and she's been on the same board I've been on for the past three years. So it was just crazy to me not knowing who she was. And she's my legislator.

**Mei:** I mean, that's not that far off for me because I, I'm with you. I feel like I don't really have a great understanding of who is representing.

Us where I live. And I think, again, I just think it's really impressive that you are taking the time to educate yourself and get involved and be an advocate for the people that you care about. And it's really just really impressive.

**Wyatt:** The thing about having a younger person run to is it encourages the current generations that are gonna be coming up into adulthood to either run themselves [00:25:00] or actually go and vote. 'cause I, I know so many people who don't care to vote you, you don't vote unless it's the presidential election. You, nobody cares.

So I, I'm really gonna use my knowledge of how to use social media and websites and stuff to push for youth to go out and vote and be like, I'm, I'm here for you guys.

**Mei:** I really do think that a lot of it is the educational component of just not realizing like, oh, like my vote for this really will impact this piece of legislation. I think there's, and I speak again from my own experience, lack of understanding of the impact that the people representing us have.

**Wyatt:** Yeah.

And you know, they don't really teach civics and. At school anymore either. And that, that, that's definitely a big reason probably for why so many youth don't know what's going on or acknowledge what's going on. Yeah. And then you combine that with the fact that like, you don't even know who your legislators are unless you're attending their meetings.

Like, why should we have to go and attend their meetings for them to hear us?

**Mei:** Yeah.

**Wyatt:** They should be coming to [00:26:00] us.

**Mei:** So true. Gillian, sorry, I know we cut you off earlier.

**Gillian:** Oh no, it's okay. I was just gonna say that I feel like you're the perfect example of progress. Passion leads to progress.

**Wyatt:** Yeah, that means a lot to me. I, I definitely. I think I've struggled with, you know, my passion sometimes over my professionalism. but you know, to me, as long as I'm doing something morally and ethically correct, it, it, it, it's not wrong. If I'm not hurting anyone, if I'm saying something that's true and

honest, I, if it makes someone upset that that's their own issue, you know, we, we gotta face the true reality sometimes.

When it comes to like, the lack of youth services in our community and it. I just, I need some people to listen to me sometimes and they don't want to, so I have to just be brutally honest with some of these community leaders.

**Mei:** That takes definitely a level of bravery as [00:27:00] well. 'cause it's, it's scary, challenging people who A, are older B have a lot more like power or perceived power than you in fighting that, that like power dynamic as well. That's definitely, it's, it's scary and so yeah. In terms of Youth of Lewis County, where do you hope to take it? What's, what's the big picture look like?

**Wyatt:** At least in like the short term in the next couple of years is really build it up, get me into a paid position.

'cause it's entirely volunteer for me right now. Get more youth involved, get more grants, and really set ah the groundworks for a future organization that will allow the next generations to come in. And I think that's the important part is we don't want Youth of Lewis County to become stagnant based off one generation, like it would be Gen Z right now.

We don't want YOLC to be stagnant based off Gen Z. We want it to be able [00:28:00] to. Progress with the next generation, which would be Gen A and then you know the next one after that. And it's gonna be their duty, not mine, to ensure that it keeps going that way.

**Mei:** That's a really great mindset to have. What you're saying reminds me a lot of what a previous episode guest said his name was Scott Bryant Comstock and he had founded the Children's Mental Health Network, which is no longer up and running anymore.

And he's, you know, moved on. He's retired. But he had said like, it's so important that the older generations learn to let go of their baby and. Realize that they're creating something so that the next generation can take it over and make it even better. And a lot of what he was saying was a lot of people in his generation don't wanna let go.

And yeah, have that mindset of, no, I'm do, I'm setting it up and this is the way it should [00:29:00] be. And that's where progress gets stalled. So I think it's really cool that you already have that mindset of creating this institution that you will pass on to the next generation and the next generation.

**Wyatt:** Yeah, and I've, I've definitely already faced that. You know, the, the youth of Lewis County as a whole has pretty much started from my own ideas and just like hearing my coworkers at other jobs and other community members just complaining about these things. And I was like, well, if you guys aren't gonna do it, I'm just gonna go do it.

So I started it. And then as more people got involved, you know, I had to learn to let go of certain things and be like, well, I know I can't control all of this, I can't do this, I can't do this. Just take control of what I can, but be willing to let go of it at some point. I definitely, I don't know if I see myself still being, if this organization's still a thing in the next 10 years, like still being here, I'll still be here to support it, but I don't know if I would want to continue working for it.

**Mei:** [00:30:00] Yeah.

That, I mean, that makes a lot of sense and I think you from young person to young person, I understand. Like I. You are so early on in your career, you're still in school. Right. And so it makes perfect sense to me that you want to build this up, but don't necessarily see yourself staying in for 10 or in the next 10 years or so. Yeah. Or after 10 years. Yeah. And I'm sure you will continue doing great things even, even after you leave.

**Wyatt:** I'll try.

**Mei:** Yeah. Do you have anything else you wanna add that we didn't touch on or ask about?

**Wyatt:** I don't think so. If anybody has questions, you can always reach out to me. I, I, I'm a very open person.

**Mei:** Yeah. We can definitely put your like website and contact info in the description.

**Wyatt:** Yeah.

**Gillian:** if you would like to contact us, you can email us at [staytuned@umassmed.edu](mailto:staytuned@umassmed.edu) and check out the Transitions ACR website at [UMassmed.edu/transitions](http://UMassmed.edu/transitions) ACR, thanks for being here, and be sure to stay tuned for next time.